

Half-Hour Portraits of Dickens's Greatest Characters



1812—Feb 7—1912

Admirable note in every novel of Charles Dickens, the note that makes mankind love him almost as much as he is loved for humor, is his noble hatred of all forms of cruelty—the cruelty of greedy ignorance in *A Tale of Two Cities*; the cruelty of selfishness and hypocrisy in *Peckham*; the cruelty of avarice in *Ralph Nickleby*; and the cruelty of self-love and pride in *Stretton*; the cruelty of obstinacy in *Mr. Dombey*; the cruelty of false mission and puritanism in *Jellyby*; the cruelty of hard, austere morality in *Mrs. Glessam* and *Thomas Gradgrind*.

It is in keeping with his warm, generous nature that he should assail these cruelties more vehemently than those cruelties that spring up in creatures distorted by unhappy birth and conditions. Thus, though he depicts *Bill Sikes* as the brute that he is, a brute without a single better impulse, without a qualifying trait, Dickens's spirit does not rise against him as it does when he tells of *Peckham*, the educated man, or when he depicts the cruelty, conscious of unconscious, of the other characters just named. Even in *Quilp*, that night-mare study of malicious, perverting, complete cruelty, he draws a creature of mere animal cruelty. His gorge does not rise against *Quilp*.

But in *Sir John Chester* of "Barnaby Rudge," Dickens paints the most cruel of those cruel types that he truly hates, *Sir John* talented, wise, rich, blessed by birth and breeding to his greatest picture of cruelty, because it is a cruelty born and nurtured in an intelligent mind, springing up at first merely as an incidental thing in a life of cold, egotistical calculation. It so grows within its possessor that at last he has as much pleasure in being cruel as he has in his pursuit of other pleasures.

Sir John Chester's treatment of *Hugh* may seem to make him, at first sight, an incredible monster of cruelty—but the statistics of the founding asylums of earth will answer that he is no monster, or, if he is, that there have been, and are, many hundred thousands of monsters like him among men.

SIR JOHN CHESTER was well past fifty but age sat beautifully on him. His face always calm and pleasant was quite juvenile in its beauty and clearness. A constant, graceful smile showed white, well-ordered teeth. The faintest of lace ruffles fell over delicate hands, tender as a woman's. There were no marks of age or passion, envy, hate or discontent.

Nobody ever saw his graceful slender body attired in anything except the height of fashion from his youth to his sword. He was as dainty in the privacy of his bed-chamber as in public. Silks and flowered broadsides wrapped him round in slumber; and when he had been haled suddenly from bed, he would have appeared smiling and perfect.

No man knew so well as he that thoughtfulness and passion begot wrinkles. No one knew so well as he that it is more becoming to bless a man than to curse him. No man knew the finest code of morality in the world, the most elevated thoughts, and the most gentlemanly sentiments were those expressed by that writer who should ever be England's pride—his Lord Chesterfield. Holding himself according to the precept laid down by that profound and perfect gentleman, *Sir John Chester* never was guilty of an ungentlemanly action.

Unhappily, *Sir John* suffered sad disappointment in his son *Edward*. After *Lady Chester's* death, the son had been sent away to be educated at a distance, because a boy hardly capable of sort of thing that a gentleman can have about him. He had been educated carefully that he might do full credit to *Sir John*; and his father had every reason to believe that his training had been such as to bring out in him the same qualities of mind and heart that he possessed in such full measure himself.

But *Edward* betrayed a discouraging not to say plebeian, weakness for all those characteristics and impulses that are calculated to shock a gentleman. He was a life of those of his Lord Chesterfield. *Edward* devoted to form of rudeness which common persons call frankness and candor. He had a crude habit of associating with people or avoiding them according to his likes and dislikes. Worse than all, he entertained absurd and quite thoroughly vulgar opinions on the subject of love, which misled him so far that he quite refused to pay court to any of the rich and aristocratic young women whom his father suggested to him.

Sir John was patient about it. He spoke to *Edward* in a manner that should have touched even so obdurate a young man as he was. "You have to thank me, Ned," said he, "for being of good family. Your mother—charming person as she was, and almost broken-hearted, and so forth, to leave me, when she was, unfortunately compelled to become immortal—had nothing to boast of in that respect. Her father wished to marry his daughter into a good family. He had his heart's desire, Ned. She stepped at once into the best and poliest circles, and I have stepped into a fortune which I assure you, was very necessary to my comfort, quite indispensable. Now, my good fellow, that fortune is among the things that have been. I am living on an inconceivable income and am the handsomest prepossessing, elegant fellow, and I throw you into society that I can still command. You must repay me by marrying well and making the most of yourself."

Edward Chester not only declined to view marriage thus promptly but aggravated his unfeeling behavior by falling in love with a girl who had hardly

any fortune at all. As if to outrage *Sir John* still more, she was the niece of a man for whom he had immense contempt. Indeed, he had hated not been against his principles. *Sir John* would, without doubt, have hated *Geoffrey Haredeale*, the uncle of *Emma Haredeale*, with a most malignant hatred.

Geoffrey Haredeale had been his boyhood friend and schoolmate. He had done *Chester's* lessons for him and taken whippings for him. When they became men, it became necessary, unfortunately, for *Sir John* to take *Haredeale's* sweetheart from him and marry her himself. These, and similar recollections, were, of course, quite sufficient in themselves to make *Sir John* dislike *Haredeale* intensely. But there was added to this the savage speech of *Haredeale* whenever they met.

These meetings were not of *Haredeale's* seeking. Indeed, he tried desperately to avoid them. He dreaded, some day, he was carried away by his fury, and run his enemy through the body.

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XII.—Sir John Chester; Dickens's Most Cruel Character

ing a nut carefully. "So exceedingly undutiful, so irreverent, that it is quite impossible for us to go on. If you will do me the favor to ring the bell, the servant will show you to the door. Since you have no moral sense remaining, I beg you to return to this roof no more. Go to the Devil, at my express desire. Good day."

Sir John's handsome face was a little flushed, when he rang the bell for his servant after *Edward*, without a word, had left the house. "Peak," said he to the man, "if that gentleman who has just left should call at any time, I'm not at home. You'll tell him no and shut the door."

Soon it was whispered about, so cety that that charming and amiable *Sir John* was very unfortunate in his son, who had occasioned him great grief and sorrow. It always happened that whenever *Sir John* had reason for desiring something to be whispered around, though he himself, apparently remained quite mute. Thus, long ago

enough to make him arise and go to the door, sword in hand. Nobody was here. He returned to bed and fell into an uneasy sleep.

Whatever may have been the associations that his sudden sight of *Hugh's* face brought back to *Sir John Chester*, whatever strong reason may have been his for knowing that something of long ago had sprung into life again before him—he did not permit it to disturb his even life nor did it incline him to dissuade his half-savage protegee from courses that were pretty certain to lead him to the gallows.

Indeed, he rather encouraged *Hugh*, in his playful, gentlemanly way, and especially so when there came the first stirrings of the troubles that were destined to follow the religious agitation set on foot by the sincere but half-crazed nobleman, *Lord George Gordon*.

There were wretched hordes in London in those days that waited only for any man, good or bad, to incite

them. There were schemes outlaws in and about London in plenty, who were reckless enough, and bold enough, to sack the town itself if occasion offered. Thousands of these wretched people, so poor that nothing could make them more wretched, hundreds of these outlaws, and tens of thousands of honest people who were

prominent as *Hugh* should escape. He was taken, tried and sentenced to be hanged. With him, and doomed to die at the same time, was *Dennis*, the hangman—a miller come to the grinding.

On the morning of the day before that set for the execution, *Sir John Chester* was breakfasting gracefully in bed, when a visitor was announced. He was one who knew both *Chester* and *Haredeale*—a brave, honest citizen named *Varden*. He stood with uncon-

cerned, almost a contemptuous smile, though *Haredeale* cried: "Cold-blooded, hollow, false villain. I spurn you like a faithless dog!" and struck him.

Sir John threw away his scabbard and his hat, and rushed at him, making so desperate a jump at his heart that, had *Haredeale's* guard not been lightning-like and true, it would have stretched him dead.

Even in that instant, *Haredeale* put a stop on his rage. He parried the rapid thrusts without flinching, and called out, with a kind of frantic terror on his face: "Not to-night! In God's name, not to-night!"

Both lowered their weapons. "I warn you," cried *Haredeale*, "Not to-night! He warned in time!"

"Did you believe that your every look and word was not to be accounted for, and was not well remembered?" asked *Sir John* deliberately, though now he dropped his mask and showed his bitter hatred.

"Once more," cried his opponent, "I implore you not to come within reach of my sword to-night! Oh, why have we met? To-morrow would have cast us far apart forever!"

"That being the case," replied *Chester*, "I am sorry to find you a coward."

Not another word was spoken. They attacked each other fiercely. They were matched. Though *Haredeale* had advantage of strength and height, *Chester* had the superior skill and certainly superior coolness.

After a few exchanges, they grew hotter and more furious. Each inflicted and received slight wounds. Directly after receiving one of these in his arm, *Haredeale*, making a keener thrust as he felt the warm blood spurting out, plunged his sword through his opponent's body till the blade was stopped by the hilt.

Their eyes met, and were on each other, as he drew it out. He put his arm about the dying man, who repulsed him, feebly, and dropped upon the turf. Raising himself upon his hands, he gazed at *Haredeale* for an instant, with scorn and hatred in his look, but as if he remembered, even then, that this expression would distort his features, he tried to smile, and fell back, dead, with a gasp.

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are sure what name was uttered on the gallows. I know that you believe this doomed man, *Hugh*, to be your son!"

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He kissed his delicate hand gracefully as a token of dismissal, and the man, giving *Sir John* one look, withdrew.

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He listened next day to the city clocks-booming out the hour of noon. When they had ceased, he knew that *Hugh* was dead. He went abroad that evening the same polished gentleman that he always had been, unruffled, genial, smiling.

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he learned that *Edward Chester* had married *Emma Haredeale* with the free and glad permission of her uncle, who had come to know and respect the young man so well that it broke down his hatred of the *Chester* race.

"I have lived a mistaken life," said *Mr. Haredeale*. "I have broken, where I should have bent. I have mixed alone when my spirit should have mixed with all God's great creation. The men who learn endurance are they who call the whole world brother. I turned from the world, and I pay the penalty."

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lost no opportunity of treating him roughly and like a dog—an invention that *Hugh* took to himself as an article of faith after he had liquor enough.

"If these vagabonds should inflict some little chastisement on *Haredeale*," reflected *Sir John*, after *Hugh* had swaggered out, "it would be extremely agreeable to my feelings and would amuse me beyond measure." He dropped in a few kindly hints about *Mr. Haredeale* to certain other desperate spirits whom he knew.

His affectionate wish was not left unfulfilled very long. From peaceful assemblies of the crazy nobleman's adherents, there sprang turbulent crowds. These turbulent crowds, left untrained and unrestrained by a faltering Lord Mayor, joined into riotous bands. A moral plague ran through the city. Sober workmen cast down their tools, infected by the disorder that sprang up as if by magic. From every slum, every dingy place, there issued what was bred there, to rule the riots.

For four days the mob held London in its hand. Seventy-two private houses owned by prominent Catholics or Protestants who had refused to pander to the cry against them, were burned down. Four great jails, including *Newgate*, were destroyed and their prisoners liberated. More than two hundred people were killed in the streets; and nobody ever knew how many of those who were in the slumming places, which they crept after the government sent the military into the city.

Foremost among the rioters was *Hugh*. It was a strange evidence of the disorder and grotesqueness that ruled men's minds that *Hugh's* closest companion and abettor was *Dennis*, the hangman of London.

The first violent deed that these did with their followers was to march out of London and burn down *Mr. Haredeale's* great house, after pillaging the *Maypole Inn*. They had so timed their arrival at the *Haredeale* estate that they reached it before *Haredeale* could, and found his niece *Emma* and her companion *Dolly Varden* protected only by a few servants, who were killed or captured after as much defense as they could make against the huge mob. The two girls were carried off, and *Mr. Haredeale*, riding madly from London when he saw the flames on the distant spire, arrived only to find red ruins.

He made frantic search, giving himself no rest day or night, and penetrating into places where the mere whisper of his name or religion would vain. Such was the dismay in all London, so powerless were the authorities, that none could help him. But, if he failed to discover the whereabouts of the kidnapped girls, he did discover that he was indebted to *Chester* for the attack on his house.

One night, the night of the attack on *Newgate*, *Mr. Haredeale*, venturing into the thick of the raving mob, was rescued from imminent danger by *Edward Chester*. In his extremity, *Haredeale* accepted the young man's assistance in the hunt. The two succeeded at last in finding and rescuing the girls, who had suffered nothing worse than imprisonment in an old house, their captors deliberated what to do with them.

As soon as order was restored, the authorities, eager to make up for their previous neglect, hurried the rioters to jail by hundreds and pressed to hang them by scores. It was impossible that one who had been so prominent as *Hugh* should escape. He was taken, tried and sentenced to be hanged. With him, and doomed to die at the same time, was *Dennis*, the hangman—a miller come to the grinding.

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